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MANAGING WOOL FOR INCREASED PROFIT

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Annual income from a sheep enterprise is derived from two sources, lamb and wool. Although a majority of the gross income is from the sale of lambs, wool also adds to this total amount. Siebert (1984) reported that in 1982 up to 21% of a sheep producer's total income from the sheep enterprise was from wool if the USDA Wool Incentive payment was included. Just how much of the total gross income wool contributes will vary, but "wool that is clean earns more green". In order to keep wool clean producers need to manage the wool crop not only at shearing but throughout the year.

At market the value of your wool is determined by several factors. Some of these (grade, fleece weight, fleece uniformity) are determined by genetics. Thus, you can upgrade wool by careful selection and breeding.

Other factors which determine the value of your wool are related to management and environment. Paying close to these factors will have an influence on the value of your wool. Keeping wool clean and free of contamination whether vegetable matter or other foreign material increases yield. Higher yields mean lower conversion costs for the woolen mills and a higher value for the wool. Year-round control of wool contamination is the key.

YEAR-ROUND WOOL MANAGEMENT

Branding Fluids

In the past few years problems have been encountered by the woolen mills with branding fluids or paint. The problem is that some of these branding fluids are not scourable during the normal scouring process. The best advice would be not to use any branding fluid. However, for most producers the use of branding fluid is necessary for identification purposes, so choose a scourable fluid manufactured for this purpose.

Results of the American Sheep Producers Council first branding fluid tests indicated that no branding paints were completely scourable. Since then two additional fluids have been tested and their scourability seems acceptable.

The two branding fluids reported to have acceptable scourability include Ausi-Mark manufactured by Coopers Animal Health Inc. of Kansas City, Missouri, and Etro-Mark manufactured by Vetline of Ft. Collins, Colorado.

Never use house or barn paint to brand sheep as these are not scourable.

Even when a scourable branding fluid is used use it sparingly. Excessive levels of branding fluid decreases the value of your wool. Branding equipment (such as numbers or letters) not thoroughly cleaned after each use results in an excessive amount of branding fluid applied to the wool. So it is important to keep this equipment clean after each use.

Don't dilute branding fluids with diesel fuel, gasoline or linseed oil because this can make a scourable branding fluid non-scourable.

Plastic Twine

Plastic twine contamination of wool first surfaced as a serious problem several years ago. Once in the wool it is virtually impossible to remove during the manufacturing process and because of this manufacturers have threatened to discontinue the purchase of domestic wool if the problem is not resolved.

To keep plastic twine from becoming a contaminant of your wool the best advice would be not to use it on your farm or ranch. If used keep plastic or synthetic twines away from your sheep. It doesn't matter what color the twines are; they are all problems once they get into the wool.

Hay bales tied with plastic twine should not be ground until the twine is removed. Pick up the twine once it has served its use and dispose of properly. This usually means burning or burying as they are not biodegradable. Don't use synthetic twines to tie up gates in areas where you keep your sheep.

Vegetable Matter

Minimizing vegetable matter content (burs, grass seeds, awns, chaff, hay, straw) of your wool clip will help to increase its value. Normal scouring procedures will not remove burs and similar materials thus additional costs are required by the manufacturer. This results in a lower bid offered on a lot of wool with high vegetable matter content.

Avoid grazing any pasture or range that is dominated by plants that contaminate wool. If you must graze such areas remove the sheep when the seeds of these plants mature.

At feeding time, avoid spilling or pitching feed over the backs of the sheep or on their heads. With properly designed feeders vegetable matter contamination from feedstuffs can be kept to a minimum. Plans for such feeders are available through your county Extension Office.

Feeding the Flock

If sheep are to produce wool up to their genetic potential and provide you with a wool crop to manage, nutrition is important. Because wool is primarily protein, rations must contain adequate protein levels, especially during the winter months, along with proper amounts of energy and minerals. Under most conditions rations balanced to meet the ewes' needs for maintenance, gestation and lactation are sufficient to provide for maximum wool production.

SHEARING MANAGEMENT

Shearing time is harvest time. Now is not the time to slack off on keeping the wool clean and free of contamination. In order to maintain a high quality product pay close attention to the following.

Shear only when the wool is dry

Damp or wet fleeces mildew when sacked. This stains the wool and lowers its value. Wool that is sacked with excessive moisture levels will also heat, resulting in an actual decomposition of the wool fiber and make it virtually worthless.

Keep shearing area clean

The shearing area should be clean and dry. Have brooms handy and use them regularly. Locate the catch pens close to the shearing area. Catch pens should be clean and dry. Don't spread fresh straw in the catch area; the straw will get onto the shearing floor and into the wool.

Shear black-faced sheep last

Shear the white-faced sheep first and sack this wool separately. This will prevent contaminating the shearing area with black fibers. Wool that is free of black fibers has a higher value.

Avoid second cuts in the wool

Hire competent shearers. It is their responsibility to remove the fleece in one piece with a minimum of second cuts.

Remove tags and bag separately

Gather any tags, dung locks, stained wool and floor sweepings and sack them separately. The tags have some value but will mildew or stain good wool if placed in the same sack.

Use only paper twine to tie fleece

After shearing tie the fleece with the flesh side out. Use only paper twine to tie the fleece. Never tie fleeces with plastic, sisal or jute twines.

Bag and store wool in clean dry area

After the fleeces are tied place in approved wool sacks. Once a bag is sufficiently filled tie off the ends with cotton string. Number and mark each sack for contents. If wool is not taken directly to market following shearing store wool bags in an area that is clean and dry, protected from dirt, dust and rodents.

MARKETING

Where and how you market your wool obviously will affect your profit. Wool in South Dakota may be sold through a cooperative or a private buyer. Wool cooperatives serve as a marketing agent and sell your wool at the optimum time based on their expert judgement.

Keep in mind, wherever you sell, that a buyer who gives one price for all wool is operating on averages, penalizing good wool and subsidizing poor wool.

You may want to consider selling your wool on a grade and yield basis or on a core test result. Selling on a core basis generally requires a substantial quantity of wool to make the cost of the test feasible, so it is not suited to producers with small flocks. The core test provides information on the fineness (grade) and yield (percent clean fiber). It insures that you get paid for the grade and type of wool you have produced.

No matter what method you use to market wool make sure you receive the proper receipts indicating the pounds of wool sold and the price per pound. These receipts are necessary because the final step in marketing is applying for wool incentive payments at your county ASCS office.

The wool incentive program is financed by tariffs on wool and wool products imported into the U.S. The incentive payment you will receive is based on the price you got for your wool in comparison to the U.S. average wool price that year. The more you receive for your wool the higher your incentive payment.

AMERICAN WOOL...PACK IT WITH PRIDE!

For the U.S. wool industry to survive in the future more and more producers will need to change their attitudes toward wool and treat it as a valuable product not a by-product from raising sheep. In addition, sheep producers need to develop a pride in wool production. As much pride should be attained from marketing the wool crop as producing a draft of lambs that top the market.

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